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Critical pedagogy and youth: Negotiating complex discourse worlds

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Abstract

Curriculum and policy documents in many states and countries around the world, but more specifically in Queensland, Australia are underpinned by an emancipatory agenda, in particular the principles of social justice. Educators are called upon to achieve this through a pedagogy which is immersed in the language of critical theory. This article explores the notion that students may achieve the syllabus outcomes related to the critical agenda however it questions whether contemporary youth are making choices that further the critical transformative cause. Key foci are the discourses of youth, the intentional discourses of schooling and the discourses of society, that are legitimated through the accounts of young people for whom emancipation is not a key issue. These discourses have been interpreted within a critical poststructuralist framework, using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore the macro and micro elements of the data. The article illuminates the complex negotiations of these youth as they traverse the contradictory terrain of their worlds, and argues for the continued importance of a critical agenda in schools.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy; Youth; Discourse worlds; Critical Discourse Analysis; Critical Poststructuralism

Introduction

Curriculum and policy documents in many states and countries around the world, for example in Australia, New Zealand, America and Britain are underpinned by an emancipatory agenda, in particular recognisable principles of social justice such as diversity, equity, supportive environments and active participation in society. These principles also underpin recent reform in Queensland (Education Queensland, 2000a; Education Queensland, 2000b; Education Queensland, 2000c). This means that Queensland as a state is committed to an agenda that supposedly doesn't eschew the realities of an individualised market economy in a globalised world. Educators are called upon to achieve this through a pedagogy which is immersed in the language of critical theory and emancipation. These priorities of syllabus documents can be juxtaposed against recent highly vocal criticisms in the Australian national media by conservative ministerial advisors that 'the traditional academic curriculum has been jettisoned for ideology' (Donnelly, 2006), and it is evident that pursuing an emancipatory agenda is a complex, contested and visible task.

To further complicate the emancipatory goals of the curriculum, Kenway and Bullen (2001) refer to the 'uneven hybridization of education, entertainment and advertising' (p. 151), whereby education is being subsumed by consumer-media culture, and students expect, and get, little gratification from regulative educational contexts (Bernstein, 1996; Blackman, 1998) such as school. Attempts to enact a critical agenda with young people must be situated within the intersecting, often contradictory discourses of youth, schooling and society. This paper argues the heightened importance of the critical agenda in schools to enable young people to negotiate the contradictory discursive currents which permeate their worlds. First I explore the contradictory discourses which circulate within the life-worlds, school-worlds and civic worlds of youth. I then describe a current study which analyses accounts of youth and how they negotiate such contradictions. I suggest important foci for critical pedagogy, and I provide evidence to suggest the increasing importance of an (often marginalised) critical agenda.

Discourses of Youth

Historically, the term 'youth' has been variously constructed as a category of people who are not children, yet neither are they adults. One of the problems of this definition of youth is that it is not clear exactly when one passes from childhood to youth or indeed from youth to adulthood. The increasing complexity of society, and consequently of life courses or pathways, means that a linear view of the life trajectory is no longer appropriate (2003; Pais, 2000). Intersecting discourse worlds of youth, schooling and society for young people today often involves negotiating multiple incompatible or contradictory relational imperatives, and as such, the notion of uncertainty is a defining feature of their lives. Such destabilised and less predictable (Côté, 2002) life pathways mean that young people must continually make choices about what is salient for them at particular times (Wright, Macdonald, Wyn and Kriflik, 2005). Sometimes such choices may be at odds with the expected attributes or behaviours of the 'phase of life' that is applied to them by adults and society, and as such they are marginalised or further tagged as 'problem' cases.

Popular discourses of youth include the dominant representation of youth as 'troubled' or 'troubling'(Griffin, 2001) in terms of social problems such as drug abuse, crime, teenage pregnancy, truancy, sexuality, racial and ethnic relations, and sometimes spirituality and religion (Griffin, 2001; White and Wyn, 2004). Such a discourse of 'troubled' youth tends to use particular 'markers' as signifiers of possible deviant or troubling behaviour, and fails to consider the complexities that shape the subjectivities of youth. These 'markers' often include class, race, ethnicity, gender, and location, and whilst these facets of identity importantly must be

considered, they should not be taken in isolation, with no regard for the complex, intersecting aspects which continuously shape and form one's subjectivities.

Civic participation and resistance

Since the 1970s, projects concerned with 'participation' have become common, and many of these have a social change agenda embedded within them (Wierenga, 2003). Such projects related to youth, according to Stacey, Webb, Barratt, Lagzdins, Moulds and Stone (2005), have generally had a human rights focus, however they argue that often such projects are concerned with what adults can do to help youth rather than how youth themselves can take action. Stacey et al also suggest that youth are not recognised for their involvement in environmental, human rights or peace movements, and are consequently often regarded as apathetic community members. Turner (2005) argues that many youth may be deeply concerned about the environment and embrace the principles of social justice, however Ellis (2004) found that although youth may support human rights and social justice ideals 'in principle', they tend not to actually engage in any real social action to promote change. She indicates that their reported reasons for non-engagement include: It doesn't affect them and therefore it is not their problem; it is not seen as their responsibility as people in the community are paid to do such work, or governments are responsible; and they foster feelings of helplessness in terms of effecting change. Those who did engage in some form of active participation, according to Ellis (2004), were personally affected by the cause, for example having a disabled family member, and therefore taking some responsibility for accessibility, or having gay friends, and defending them in public. White and Wyn (2004) point out one of the ironies of youth participation; that is youth are encouraged to 'actively participate' in society through youth forums and so on, however they are not taken seriously if they mobilise politically. They argue that 'legitimate' participation is framed in such a way as to reside solely in government-defined activities and spheres, and that if youth step outside such parameters they are positioned as trouble-makers or as easily influenced by organisations labelled as left-wing. Raby (2005) suggests that adolescence is a time when resistance to structural or dominant norms in society is probably most readily achieved as they experience powerful 'new' emotions and behaviours, they are under intense scrutiny, and they have a growing awareness of the wider world.

Intentional Discourses of Schooling

Over twenty years ago, Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) proclaimed that education was under siege from neoliberal discourses which call for an emphasis on individual success in the market economy (Fairclough, 1989), a 'back to basics' curriculum, and focus on imparting particular cultural knowledges (Apple, 2004) for the 'good' of the country . During the eighties, such conservative notions of schooling were enforced directly and strongly by governments, for example the Thatcher government in Britain, and the Reagan administration in America, to combat what was seen as the radical left who advocated critical pedagogy and the study of ideology supposedly at the expense of 'the basics' and the literary canons. In Britain a national curriculum was established to standardise programs across the country in an attempt to standardise student learning. A corollary outcome was the confining of teachers to the parameters of conservative government agendas. Contemporary education debates are taking a similar turn, however in a much more insidious way, through popular media texts which purport to champion the views of parents and the community about 'failing schools' (2006; Donnelly, 2004). For example in Australia, Donnelly (a former English teacher and academic) has been accorded 'official' (Apple, 1993) authority in education through his commission to report on 'Why our schools are failing' by the Menzies Research centre, which is chaired by conservative Liberal member Malcolm Turnbull, and whose reports have influenced Government policy (Donnelly, 2004); and through his regular articles appearing in *The Australian*, the only national newspaper. Donnelly dismisses

critical pedagogy, emancipatory agendas, exploring multiple perspectives and problem-solving collectively as 'ideology', a term he uses to create a binary between these 'left wing clichés' and the 'important' work of the basics, the study of the literary canons and one endorsed, sanitised version of history.

Whilst policy regarding schooling and curriculum in Australia has been influenced by this steady political shift to the right, for example in Queensland under the Bjelke-Petersen regime in the eighties, particular texts about ideology were removed from school shelves; there have also been educational influences such as specific declarations from ministerial councils for education, including the *Hobart Declaration on Schooling* (Australian Education Council, 1989), and more recently the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (MCEETYA, 1999). Such declarations espoused, among other things, the principles of social justice, morality, ethics, sustainability and active participation as informed citizens, including the skills of problem-solving and analysis. Strategies for the future, such as *2010* in Queensland (Education Queensland, 2000c) were based upon similar ideals, and hence curriculum documents contain outcome statements which are posited to help students become 'multiliterate, active and informed citizens' (Queensland Studies Authority, 2005 p. 3).

Critical Pedagogy as a Transformative Practice

The role of schools, school systems, teachers and resources has become somewhat cloudy and ill-defined as schools adapt to social change (Levin and Riffel, 1997). Critical Theorists and pedagogues however, argue that schools should *initiate* change and challenge hegemonic ways of seeing the world, rather than simply coping with change (Featherstone, 1992; Giroux, 2000a; hooks, 2003; Kanpol, 1997; Shapiro, 1995). Such theorists believe that in our postmodern world of corporate culture, the critical pedagogy agenda is important to engender a revitalised, vibrant, informed public forum in which 'media realities' of our social world can be interrogated and contested at school (McLaren, 2003; Shapiro, 1995).

We claim to be educating young people through critical pedagogy to be part of the emancipatory agenda. Are they however, being regulated to 'fit' (Grossberg, 1994) into the politics of social justice, only to lose them to globalised culture and what Steinberg & Kincheloe (1997) argue are modern society's most successful teachers, the 'corporate pedagogues' such as Disney and Microsoft corporations, with their emphases on lifestyle choice? Giroux (1997; 2000b) calls this corporate culture's war on children. Kenway and Bullen (2001) and others (Brodhagen and Apple, 2004; Green, 2003; Kellner, 2002; Sadowski, 2003) see critical pedagogy as essential, yet acknowledge the difficulty in encouraging youth to be critical of those practices in which they have a personal investment. Kenway and Bullen (2001), along with Kellner (2002), argue that multiliteracies practices using new technologies can be harnessed as incentives for enacting social change, rather than simply as exclusionary devices against adults. Green (2003), Sadowski (2003) and Brodhagen and Apple (2004) suggest that problematising one's own investments and place in the world is integral to contemporary critical pedagogy. Further, Cohen (2006) argues that skills of respect, collaboration, social justice and voluntary active citizenship are key components of schooling so that students become engaged, responsible participants in a democracy.

Critical pedagogy is of course not the only discourse which is evident in schools. Even in schools where critical pedagogy is actively endorsed, discourses of individual academic success, knowledge acquisition, corporate 'cool' and conservative Christian values compete for attention, so that students must continually negotiate their salient priorities.

Discourses of Society

With the impact of new technologies and multiliteracies (Kalantzis and Cope, 2004; Unsworth, 2002), our social lives are changing. Much of the business of everyday living can be done without leaving home or computer screen (Luke, 2000; Thurlow and McKay, 2003), which means traditional socialisation practices are changing to incorporate cyber-practices that include virtual meeting places where social exchanges occur in both real and delayed time. Experimentation and creativity in social practices are given greater scope through digital text, evident in the creation of new signs, codes and vocabularies by users (Lankshear and Knobel, 1997; Selwyn, 2003; Thurlow, 2003). Global networks enable individuals to be part of multiple and overlapping social communities based on such things as interests or hobbies, work, ethnicity and sexual identity (Kalantzis, 1997). The potential to be part of a 'social community' is possible even if you live a long way from other members. This changing nature of 'community' has contributed to changing values for young people towards self-enlightenment and self-liberation as they actively and continuously form new connections in family, the workplace and society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) in a bid for individual fulfilment.

Postman (1993) gave a sober commentary on the effect of technology on culture, which he termed 'technopoly', over a decade ago. He lamented the loss of morals and stability, which he said had been replaced by efficiency, interest, economic advance and the ecstasy of consumption. More recently, Gee (2000) agrees that we are in the midst of a major shift in how we react to, and work within our physical, social, biological and mechanical worlds. He variously uses words such as 'chaos', 'complexity', 'flexible', 'fluid', 'dynamic', 'adaptive', and 'networks' as the catch words in our 'new capitalist' society. No longer do we ascribe to 'top-down' authoritarian, hierarchical power systems within organisations, where workers will be told what to do by someone higher up in the power structure. Flexible teamwork and harnessing available resources on a global scale, is the name of the new game, so workers are allegedly more autonomous, more involved and active citizens, and more adaptable social beings within the new global knowledge economy (Kellner, 2002). These changing characteristics of workers and society have taken place within, and been fuelled by neoliberalism (Phoenix, 2003), which serves to *individualise* workers to take responsibility for self-fulfilment and achievement (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This process of socialisation, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, releases workers in the new economy from traditional fixed ties such as family, occupation, neighbourhood, region or culture as they enter the workforce. Community-oriented policies and production-based lifestyles are being replaced with market-oriented policies and consumption-based lifestyles (Côté, 2002), and such a system and its philosophical underpinnings has been normalised through the hegemonic practices of governments and institutions over the past thirty years. Singh, Kenway and Apple (2005) suggest that individuals are induced to play the enterprise game as they see their own interests being served by such a culture, which results in a powerful, persuasive environment of calculative and self-centred views of the world. Phoenix (2003) argues that neoliberalism is about 'continually changing the self, making informed choices, engaging in competition, and taking the chances offered by the market and the government to consume and take advantage of lifelong learning' (p. 229), however it is assumed under such a system, that every individual is autonomous and therefore able to take advantage of what the market offers.

The Current Study

Theoretical and Methodological Concerns

The methodological framework of this study is informed by critical poststructuralist theory, whereby it is possible to *see* the multiple discourses through which we are inevitably and contradictorily constituted, and to

position oneself differently in relation to existing discourses so that oppressive and inequitable discourses may be dismantled (Davies, 1994). Through the discourse of critical researcher, the tenets of poststructuralism are significant not only because of their potential to call attention to the unmarked and invisible, but also because of their potential to be politically generative and socially transformative (Weedon, 1987). Peters (2003) work is helpful in making sense of a theoretical framework that draws both from critical Marxism and poststructural theory. He suggests that Marxist critical theory has not become extinct or over-ridden by a newer poststructuralist theory; rather it has been strengthened by poststructuralist readings of Marx. Peters (2003) argues that a 'complimentary thesis' is entirely feasible, whereby poststructuralist readings of Marxism are suspicious of meta-narratives or 'truths' and understand Marx's 'power' differently – 'to view it, in Foucault's terms, as pervasive, productive, positive and operating as the micro-physics of everyday life' (p. 122). In this way, by using such a 'complimentary thesis', I am able to draw upon the transformative possibilities of critical theory, overlaid with a poststructural lens, so as to explore the complexities of the enactment of critical pedagogy.

Situating the study

This research was conducted at a State High School in Queensland, Australia, chosen because of its reputation in offering programs informed by critical pedagogy, particularly in relation to visual and multimodal text. The participants were drawn from a group of students at this school, identified by their English teacher as being competent in visual and critical literacy, so the possible transfer, according to their accounts, of such abilities into their everyday lives could be studied. Three Year Eleven (16-17yr old) students (Paul, Ellen and Matt) and four Year Nine (13-14yr old) students agreed to participate in the study. This article focuses upon the Year Eleven accounts. I acknowledge that these participants are not representative of 'youth' per se, however the strong themes which emerged from the accounts of these participants suggest that a much larger study of the issues raised here is warranted. The nomenclature used to identify the data refers to individual interviews (int) or to the focus group interview (f.g), the year level (11), and the initials of the participant.

The discourses of youth, schooling and society were captured in instances (Freebody, 2003) using the participants' multimodal texts as prompts for learning conversations, semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. The key analytical foci are concerned with the processes of subjectification (or formation of identities) of these youth, and the role of power and hegemony in their heteroglossic lives (characterised by an intersecting multiplicity of texts, contexts, discourses and technologies) as they account for their enactment of a critical agenda.

I have utilised an approach to data analysis that is informed by the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This is a multidisciplinary approach that Fuller and Lee (1997) with reference to the work of McHoul & Luke (1989) suggest 'draws upon other disciplinary methods of text analysis outside linguistics, notably semiotics, critical theory and poststructuralism, in order to engage critically with questions of power and subjectivity, while at the same time paying close attention to the specificity of text' (p. 410). Fairclough (2003; 1992; 2001; 2000) is one of the major proponents of this approach, as he considers that approaches to discourse analysis which focus only on linguistic features at the expense of broader social theoretical issues, or on broader social theoretical issues at the expense of linguistic features, are not holistic enough to provide understanding of social phenomena. His view is that rather than an either/or position, such approaches can be used together to 'oscillate' between a focus on broader discourses and a focus on specific texts which constitute the representation of such discourses (Fairclough, 2003). My methods of analysis have also been informed by the work of Kamler (1997) and Threadgold (1997), which more specifically deal with notions of embodiment and performance, and Fuller and Lee's (1997) emphasis on the interpersonal functions of language interactions that constitute textual collusions. Fairclough's (1992) notion of intertextuality whereby

any discursive event is constituted by, and influenced by a multitude of other texts and contexts, is useful in my analysis as I explore how these youth draw upon other texts, contexts, dialogue and modes of meaning during their talk. My analysis here specifically focused upon the linguistic transitivity processes and their participant realisations within the clause (who or what is involved, and what are they doing, saying, being etc), as well as the use of modal adverbs, so that I could determine how the participants account for their practices, which practices are afforded value or are criticized, and how this fits with broader macro discourses of youth, schooling and society. This function of language is also interested in the meaning relationship between text and context (lexis). I looked at the lexical choices made in the data to indicate how the participants were describing themselves and others in certain contexts through language, particularly how attributes were ascribed and explained. Analysis of the specificities of the texts in this way, allowed me to explore how the participants' language is used to position themselves and others, and to legitimise their dominant cultural maps (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark and Roberts, 1978) or hegemonic assumptions.

Year Eleven Discourses

This section outlines the five major discourses that were located in the Year Eleven data. These were:

- Youth positioned through bodily practices and performative statements
- Youth as negotiating slippery roles and scales of expectation
- Youth as individual agents with expectations of agency
- Youth described through good vs. bad discourses
- Youth positioned as distinct from adults

In the interests of space, only small samples of the data and analysis will be provided here under each of these discourse headings.

Youth Positioned through bodily practices and performative statements

The subjectivities of youth that are spoken in these texts tend to rely heavily on bodily practices such as *using* the internet, *playing* console games, *playing* sport, *doing* drama, *sleeping/having sex* with people, *working* either in school or out of school… or not. This of course must be considered in terms of the interview questions being asked, such as what they do on weekends or which practices they engage in, however even in instances where questions did not specifically relate to practices, the participants often used bodily practices as descriptors of self or others. In some cases, own practices were used almost as a 'yardstick' for the practices of others, whereby the speaker was able to indicate their 'authority' to speak about and pass judgment on such matters. For example, the body is inscribed in the discourse through descriptions of gayness, anti-gayness, Christian or non-Christian activities/beliefs, slutty behaviour, radical actions and regulated behaviours, many of which overlap. Performative statements indicating either what self or others do, or what they will do, are evident in talk that positions both self and others in both their life-worlds and their school-worlds.

The schooled, regulated 'docile body' (Foucault, 1977) is legitimated in the accounts of these youth as they talk about 'sitting people down and teaching them' about alternative beliefs (int, 04, E.P), 'doing what the teacher wants' and 'trying to keep my grades up' (int, 03, M.C). The material processes, passive and active voice respectively, and pronouns used, indicate actions to regulate others who don't display appropriate behaviours (them) and actions to regulate self (my, I).

The data from the Year Eleven participants suggest contradictory accounts about raced, gendered and classed bodies which have been 'impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, and femininity' (Kohli, 1998 p. 519). These students are well aware of 'political correctness' in society and they seem to draw upon the knowledge learnt at school which focuses on social justice and equality to assure me as educator and researcher that they believe in such ideals. Alongside such unprejudicial claims in these accounts, there are contradictory instances where these participants dismiss racial, gender, class and sexuality issues as overblown and not worth the amount of attention they get in society. In the focus group interview, these participants seem to use the support of their peers to vocalise their views about race, gender and at other times, sexuality.

Text 1

MR: So do you think you are shaped by race issues in broader society?

MC: Well there's this kid I know, and his whole thing… like his whole world is shaped by being black… and…

MR: Well that's…

MC: Yeah but he plays on it…

PH: Yeah he plays on being black… I have this theory that black people can get money just by complaining about things, so they'll have a hundred percent tolerance as long as they can keep on getting money for complaining, for example um… I can't think of an example right now. And like the women's lib thing, it's still going… the ridiculous claims… 'cause they know they can make financial gain easier, so…

MR: How are they making financial gain?

PH: They sue companies…

MR: So you don't think those things are important?

MC: I do

PH: I think they're claiming that they want acceptance, but what they do want is special treatment… not all woman, I don't want to generalise, but I'm saying people who want to go out and complain about police*men* instead of police*women* and men make more money… I don't think they're trying to get acceptance, they're just trying to get money.

MC: I think that fundamentally they'd like to be accepted, but they just can't see it happening and there's always gunna be other people searching for … money probably

MR: Ellen, what do you think about this – a female perspective?

EP: Um, when we talk about this I feel like one of the guys. I don't feel like I get treated any differently. *(f.g., 05, 11)*

It seems acceptable for these 'good' students to dismiss race and gender issues as money-spinners, a reductionist account (Young, 1990) that is shaped by institutions such as the family and the school (Blackman, 1998). Matt interjects to state that he cares about such issues (politically correct), yet his language indicates he is still positioning women as a homogenous group (they) who want and need to be accepted but won't ever gain such acceptance. In an earlier interview (int., 04, M.C) he suggests that 'I still think that man is a more neutral word for both sides', and 'we can still use those terms without any of the intention behind it'. He doesn't want to offend, yet he normalises gender terms without interrogation. Here he also refers to money. This may be his way of rationalizing support for certain groups over others, as they (other people) are all looking for money, so we (society? those of us who don't complain?) can only support some – a sliding scale. Paul seems to accept some women (the ones who don't complain), yet not those who are outspoken about 'ridiculous' claims. Ellen dutifully plays the game when asked to comment, by not offending anyone, not complaining, and identifying with the boys through her behavioural process 'feel like' (one of the guys). Ellen's response is consistent with findings from other research studies which suggest that a belief in individual agency means that the impact of gender is downplayed in her life (see Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Roberts and Sachdev, 1996; Willis, 1998).

Youth as negotiating slippery roles and scales of expectation

These youth talk about youth and youth culture in terms of change, busy-ness, roles they negotiate, and scales of expectation from peers, teachers and parents. Alongside expectations from adults about school and place in society, there are also expectations from and of peers. Categories are constructed by peer groups which are explained in relation to what they exclude (Fuss, 1991), yet these participants seem to be aware to some extent of what Davies (1994) terms, 'the limitations and powerful entrapments entailed in the categories' (p. 2). These Year Eleven youth understand the categories of 'nerd', 'soccer jerk' and so on in relation to where they sit within, or outside, such categories. This is not a simple 'in or out' construction however, as there is a sophisticated delineation of levels or degrees within the categories; the understanding of which seems to be expected within the peer group.

Despite the critical social justice agenda at this school as evidenced through the school English Program and syllabus documents, these students are getting a definite message at school that high grades, individual achievement and entry into university are the things that count.

Text 2

MR: So do you think… does everybody have to do English and Maths?

EP: Yeah.

MR: Do you think that's an issue that people don't have to do stuff about civics or society or…

EP: Um, well I guess that is an issue, but then again um, some people aren't going to be interested in that, and it's not going to um, put them in a position where they can get the degree they want…

MR: But do you think…?

EP: It would be good to say that all people should be aware of all of these things, but um…

MR: Do you think that's a way we could get some social action happening, if we had a subject like that at school, which talked about ways we could make a difference and the sorts of things we could be involved in? Do you think maybe that's as important as having a good career?

EP: I guess, yeah… that's a hard thing to say because um, people at schools at the moment, already have a third of their subjects they have to do… um… at private schools it's a half… *(int.,04, E.P)*

Ellen's use of the vague participant 'some people' and the finite modal 'going to be…' indicates that she can confidently comment that this is the way it is, without directly implicating herself. She intimates that it is the school's role to prepare people for university with '…put them in a position…', yet she is conflicted about whether this is more important than social good. Her uncertainty shows through her use of the conversation filler 'um', and her speculation using the finite modals '*would be* good' and '*should be* aware' to show me as researcher, that her values are intact. My critical agenda in this research prompts me to create an argument structure whereby I use conjunctions such as 'but', and I draw her into my argument through my use of second person 'we', and strengthen my point using comparison/contrast structure 'as important as…' Ellen finds herself using a counter-argument in this situation, where she intensifies her point through the adverb 'already' to indicate that there is too much to consider at senior level, so if it doesn't lead to a good OP score or prepare you specifically for your degree, then it may just have to go. Part of successfully colluding in discourses of school is negotiating the role of 'good' student, so even though they might be asked to make decisions, think for themselves, be independent and critical (in this and many school programs), they must do so within the boundaries of 'acceptable' behaviour and 'acceptable' criteria, where what is acceptable is decided by others (teachers).

Youth as individual agents with expectations of agency

Paul uses a definite cause/effect structure in his talk, whereby the blame for lack of success at school is placed squarely on the student. He distances himself from those that 'could be' in the situation of being disadvantaged by the values or practices at school (low modality) through this relational process and the physical notion of having no contact with such students and no conceivable way of communicating with them. Through this linguistic manoeuvre, he cleverly places himself in the group that takes pleasure from trying and making the right choices (plaisir) (Kenway and Bullen, 2001), with no tolerance or understanding of those who may take pleasure in rebelling against such values (jouissance) (Kenway and Bullen, 2001) or those that are unable to compete. It seems that sliding scales in this instance are not acceptable – either you take control and achieve success or you don't, and suffer the consequences. Ellen also expresses the view that some kids 'just don't… do work at all' and that 'a person like that would probably say it was all the school's fault…' (int., 04, E.P). She is making a value judgement of people 'like that' which excludes her from such a group, and makes assumptions with the low modal 'probably' about the character of such people based on the connection between not working and blaming the school. It seems that she doesn't blame the school for not catering to some students' needs, but rather that it is their own fault for not working hard.

Text 3

MR: Why do you think you have that value… that hard work is important? What do you think has made you think that way?

PH: I don't know… it seems kind of logical.

MR: Do you think it's logical? Do you think it's an accepted value?

MC: Yeah. It's a true value… it's a proven value… Throughout history people who try hard… achieve success.

PH: It's necessary for society…

MC: That and the combination of luck…

MR: What do you mean by hard work? Do you mean hard, physical labour?

PH: No… putting the effort in.

MC: Putting the effort into whatever you're trying to do…

MR: What about people who seem to achieve success with little effort?

PH: It's not as rewarding if you don't work hard to achieve it. *(f.g., 05, 11)*

These students make it patently clear in **Text 3** that they conform to hegemonic school values of: Hard work and individual success equals life success. Lexical links such as 'true', 'proven', 'logical' and 'necessary' are used as descriptors of such values, and the comparison made with the alternative option (not working hard) indicates that 'It's not as rewarding'. It is difficult to subvert such a process, as investment and familiarity run deep, indeed even critical dialogue can be assimilated into their cultural maps (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark and Roberts, 1978), so oppositional positions or ideologies can be used to strengthen the dominant discourse. The youth in this study are constrained and organised by this school context, as they write, rewrite and improvise performances of self (Threadgold, 1997) in the formation of the 'successful student' subject (Kamler, 1997). There seems to be reluctance from these students to disrupt perceived harmony or the status quo, 'I'm not about to start initiating a protest outside McDonalds' (int., 04, E.P); which in the institutional setting of the school; where they are encouraged to buy into hegemonic discourses, regulate their behaviour and generally emulate the values of the teachers and/or school in order to be successful; is understandable. These individuals take up such discourses as their own (Davies, 2003; Whitson, 1995), often not realising that such discourses should or could be challenged.

Youth described through good vs. bad discourses

Youth as students in these accounts are described in terms of dualist notions of good or bad. **Table I** shows various language descriptors from the data that indicate 'goodness' and 'badness' at school, along with my description of the language forms. The Year Eleven participants in this study position themselves as 'good', whilst 'other' is 'bad'. There is an interesting juxtaposition in these accounts, whereby such dualist discourses of good or bad are reinforced through comparison/contrast cohesive structure, using conjunctions such as 'whereas' and 'but' to compare behaviours (material processes and performance), relational processes of having particular attributes and strong modality to indicate definite values.

Insert Table 1 here

Doing well at school by trying hard, getting good grades and not antagonizing teachers, seems to be highly valued by these students who buy into such discourses, and with this comes a certain power of which Matt is quite aware … 'there's a subtle message that people… me and my group and stuff are probably appreciated

possibly more, I don't know. Like it's not ah… it's just very subtle, just like… stick around sort of thing' (int., 04, M.C). Matt is using low modality in this interview situation to discuss a phenomenon that he has obviously felt, but that isn't explicitly acknowledged by the school. He also may not want me to think he is praising himself, contextualized in Australian society where the 'tall poppy' syndrome, whereby we need to knock people back down if they get too far above themselves, is a familiar social discourse. In the focus group interview (**Text 4**); these students also discuss the power to which they have access as the 'good' students at this school.

Text 4

MR: Talking about power, Matt said before, that you probably get away with more… and that the teachers don't want to get rid of you out of the school…

PH: It's not that…

MC: We got there in the first place by not being completely radical, like…

MR: You don't rebel too much, and you…

PH: Yeah I'm cheeky to teachers, but they don't care…

MR: That's not too much of a rebellion? So you wouldn't tell one of them to fuck off for example, or use that sort of language?

EP: I have actually…

MR: You've done that before?

EP: Yeah… but… the teacher liked me… and I was just in a really bad mood… and she said 'Oh I wasn't expecting that from you… and um'

MR: So do you think you got away with it because…

EP: Yeah I got away with it, but I felt really guilty.

PH: I had a drama assessment, so I was in a Hawaiian shirt and jeans, and I went to my next class, but because it was me, the teacher said it was OK. Like it wasn't the 'smoking, throwing rocks at teachers' kind of kids. *(f.g., 05, 11)*

Their accounts here show that they consider it almost their right to be afforded such power 'We got there in the first place by not being completely radical…', because they regulate themselves, and for the most part, do exactly what 'good' students should do. They emphasize their right to this status by drawing comparisons with 'bad' kids by using examples such as 'smoking' and 'throwing rocks at teachers' that I as adult in this situation wouldn't possibly condone. At the same time they position themselves as being a little adventurous, rather than as boring conformists.

Youth positioned as distinct from adults

The data suggest a definite binary between adult and youth. The students talk about 'when I grow up' (int., 04, M.C), being 'disowned' by your parents if you're gay, and needing to be regulated to make the right

choices or 'people would do all the subjects that don't help them out in the long run' (int., 04, E.P). Older is constructed in some ways as wiser and more sophisticated. Consequently, these students do not see their teachers as mutual learners. They consider that teachers have to know more than they do, or else why are they there?

Text 5

MR: So do you think the teacher… so you still see a teacher as someone who has the authority and knowledge…

EP: Definitely the knowledge.

PH: Yeah…

MC: And the age also…

MR: Do you ever think about the idea of co-constructed knowledge, like the teacher as a learner?

EP: I don't find that as effective, no…

PH: Yeah if you have to teach the teacher things, then… no…

EP: I think it's much better if they know… so they can give you the answer… *(f.g., 05, 11)*

It seems particularly salient in senior schooling, that these students will get what they need from their teachers in order to do well at school and achieve a good OP score. They recognise, and seem to take pleasure in the fact that in some areas the teachers may not know as much as they do, for example about youth culture and technology, however in terms of traditional 'school' knowledge and working towards OP scores, these participants are adamant as evidenced through strong modality and probabilisation in words such as 'definitely', 'much better' and 'no', that these 'expert' adults must be in control. The judgement that co-constructed knowledge is not 'as effective' adroitly negates such an approach because the comparative language suggests that it has been tried and is not as good. Gaining teacher approval through appropriate collusionary techniques seems to be tied up with such notions of power and hegemony in this school. These students take pleasure in doing well and supporting their teachers, because they don't see that there is any other way.

Further Discussion and Conclusion

The salient priorities for these participants seem to be focused on an individualist agenda, whereby they see the need to regulate self in order to achieve success at school which will ultimately lead to university entrance and therefore life success. They are prepared at this stage in their lives to accept direction from adults who are largely deemed to possess the authority to guide them in their choices. They are quite adept at intellectualising texts and to some extent, contexts, however they do not purport to engage in any real transformative social action, and they choose certain 'trendy' social causes to 'support' at least in theory. They do not seem inclined to problematise their own practices or investments, nor do they show evidence of understanding the subjectification processes which have led them to their current beliefs, actions and values.

These students are thus being rewarded by a school system that on the one hand mirrors broader social discourses of fast capitalism and self-preservation, whilst on the other hand, they are being encouraged to critique notions of power and think in ways that can enact change for a more just and equitable society. Further, they are negotiating a multiplicity of value systems regarding what is 'acceptable' or 'cool' in their lives. This seems to be difficult terrain for students to navigate, and it is understandable that these students provide contradictory accounts of their practices and beliefs. Interrogation of 'self', rather than just interrogation of texts needs to be a strong focus in the enactment of a critical agenda, and students should be given opportunities to participate actively in the community alongside more traditional academic pursuits. Discussion and debate about the conflicting discourses which influence the lives of youth is also integral to this agenda. The complex, multiple and often contradictory subjectivities (or identities) of youth need to be acknowledged and problematised (by youth and by teachers) as they negotiate the shifting terrain of their intersecting discourse worlds. These youth and their teachers should analyse their salient priorities at different times in their lives, so it becomes less a question of whether they do or don't uphold the ideals of the critical agenda, but rather that they can make informed decisions about what they can do as active citizens and when they can do it.

Inevitably there can be no easy 'answer' to the issues presented here regarding the enactment of a critical agenda by youth. However the accounts of these youth, and the macro discourses that permeate current educational debate, have highlighted the continued importance of the critical agenda in schools. If we are to uphold the ideals of social justice, equity, liberty and active participation as proposed by our underpinning educational declarations (Australian Education Council, 1989; MCEETYA, 1999) in Australia, then narrow, self-centred, uninformed and essentialist views about education, social issues and everyday practices must be problematised and disrupted. The academic curriculum need not be 'jettisoned for ideology' (Donnelly, 2006), indeed such an artificial binary of 'academic goals' versus 'active participation' must be challenged through a critical approach. Moreover if an (often marginalised) critical agenda including active participation and social justice ideals are written out of curriculum documents, then a free, socially just, equitable and responsible society may well be unattainable.

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Table 1 Good vs. bad descriptors of youth at school

'Good' Descriptors		'Bad' Descriptors	
Descriptor	Language form	Descriptor	Language form
Try hard	Material process	Don't try	Negative material process
Get A grades	Relational process	Are sports jerks	Participant, also realized through embodied performance
Have individual agency	Realized through material processes and adverbs of manner	Antagonize the teacher/are ratty	Material process, embodied performance, attribute
Gain approval	Realized through high modality for good characteristics	Are dumb	Attribute, related to embodied performance